



## CLINICAL REVIEW

# Comparison of positional therapy versus continuous positive airway pressure in patients with positional obstructive sleep apnea: A meta-analysis of randomized trials

Stanley C.N. Ha<sup>a,c</sup>, Hoyee W. Hirai<sup>c</sup>, Kelvin K.F. Tsoi<sup>b,c,\*</sup><sup>a</sup> Department of Otorhinolaryngology, Head & Neck Surgery, United Christian Hospital, Hong Kong<sup>b</sup> Hong Kong Branch of the Chinese Cochrane Centre, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong<sup>c</sup> School of Public Health and Primary Care, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

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## SUMMARY

**Background:** Obstructive sleep apnea (OSA), caused by the obstruction of the upper airway, is the most common type of sleep apnea. Continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP) and positional therapy have been shown to be effective to improve positional OSA.

**Aim:** To compare the effectiveness of positional therapy versus CPAP on positional OSA.

**Methods:** Prospective randomized trials were systematically searched from the OVID databases. The trials comparing positional therapy versus CPAP in patients with positional OSA were included. Apnea-hypopnea index (AHI), mean oxygen saturation level, arousal index, sleep efficiency, and sleep time were the outcomes of this meta-analysis.

**Results:** Three crossover trials were identified from Canada, New Zealand, and United States from 1999 to 2010. A total of 71 patients were randomly assigned to receive CPAP or positional therapy and the mean age of patients was 51 y. Positional therapy showed higher AHI (mean difference, MD: 4.28, 95% CI: 0.72–7.83) and lower oxygen saturation level (MD: –1.04, 95% CI: –1.63 to –0.46) than CPAP. It showed no distinct advantage over CPAP in terms of arousal index, sleep efficiency, and total sleep time, but CPAP reduced sleep time in the supine position.

**Conclusion:** CPAP is superior to positional therapy in reducing the severity of sleep apnea and increasing the oxygen saturation level in patients with positional OSA.

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## Introduction

Obstructive sleep apnea (OSA) is the most common form of sleep apnea and is caused by the obstruction of the upper airway. The prevalence of OSA is approximately 3–7% for adult men and 2–5% for adult women in the general population,<sup>1–3</sup> while percentages in Hong Kong are 4.1% and 2.1%, respectively.<sup>4,5</sup> OSA has been identified as an independent risk factor for neurobehavioral morbidity, hypertension, cardiovascular disease, and all-cause mortality.<sup>6–8</sup> Around half of the OSA patients have positional OSA,<sup>9,10</sup> which is classified as patients sleeping with at least a double of the apnea hypopnea index (AHI) in the supine position compared with the other sleeping positions. In general, the prevalence of positional OSA in the mild and moderate OSA patients is

higher than that in the severe OSA patients who have AHI over 30 events/h.<sup>9–11</sup>

Continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP) has been shown to be effective, as it improves sleep disordered breathing, as well as sleep quality.<sup>13,14</sup> CPAP works like a pneumatic splint to maintain a continuous level of positive airway pressure and prevent collapsing or blockage of the airway during the sleep. Nevertheless, side effects of CPAP are reported, such as skin irritation around the nose, nasal congestion, dry nasal mucosa, and mouth leaks,<sup>15,16</sup> so that compliance with CPAP can be suboptimal (<50%).<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, it is found that the sleep apneas are more frequent and prolonged in the supine position.<sup>18</sup> Therefore positional therapy, which is an external intervention to prevent OSA patients from sleeping in a supine position, is more beneficial for positional OSA patients. Although the mechanisms for the positional changes in sleep-disordered breathing are not fully understood, the non-supine position appears to reduce the tendency of posterior tongue relapse and pharyngeal collapse. Some of the recent studies also showed that positional therapy is effective in preventing the patients from

\* Corresponding author. 4/F, School of Public Health and Primary Care, Prince of Wales Hospital, Shatin, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong. Tel.: +852 9771 7668.

E-mail address: [kelvin.tsoi@gmail.com](mailto:kelvin.tsoi@gmail.com) (K.K.F. Tsoi).

sleeping in supine position with a significant reduction in AHI.<sup>19–21</sup> As the prevalence of positional OSA is high in Asiatic populations,<sup>22,23</sup> the future demand for positional therapy is assured.

Some randomized trials have compared the efficacy of positional therapy versus CPAP in patients with positional OSA.<sup>24–26</sup> Although these studies showed similar conclusions for positional therapy, the results were limited by small sample size. Therefore, this meta-analysis has been conducted from all published literature with greater statistical power, in order to distinguish whether the overall benefits of positional therapy is comparable to CPAP in patients with positional OSA.

## Methods

### Search strategy

Prospective randomized controlled trials that compared positional therapy versus CPAP in patients with obstructive sleep apnea were the target group of studies in this meta-analysis. Literature searches with keywords related to positional therapy, positive airway pressure, and obstructive sleep apnea were performed in Ovid databases, including Medline, Embase and CINAHL. In addition, some manual searches were extended to the bibliographies of review articles. The search began from the earliest available dates in the individual databases, till the date of final literature search which was on 30th Sep 2012.

### Inclusion & exclusion criteria

All randomized trials were included if they met the following criteria: i) all patients were diagnosed with positional OSA, i.e., at least a double AHI in supine position compared with non-supine position; ii) patients were randomized to compare positional therapy with CPAP; iii) the positional device was used as an external intervention to prevent patients from supine sleep, iv) sleep monitoring was conducted at night time; and v) at least one of the following outcomes was reported: AHI, mean oxygen saturation, total sleep time, sleep efficiency, or arousal index. Trials were excluded if i) patients had other medical conditions that may interfere with sleep, such as chronic respiratory disorder, heart failure, or uncontrolled allergies; ii) no ethics approval or patient consent was reported; or iii) the trials were not written in English.

### Data extraction

Two investigators (SCH, HWH) independently assessed the titles and abstracts of all generated papers for relevancy, and extracted the data into a standardized data extraction form. The data extraction form was used to record the demographic data, including names of the first author, year of publication, study location, number of participants, mean age of patients, and also the study outcomes. Consensus decisions were made by the two reviewers, regarding the inclusion of studies and data extraction. When discrepancies were found, the third investigator (KKT) would make the definitive decision for trial eligibility and data extraction.

### Study outcomes

The primary outcome of this study was AHI, which is used to assess the severity of sleep apnea based on the average number of apnea and hypopnea occurring in an hour of sleep. Apnea and hypopnea are respectively defined as a complete and partial obstruction of airway for more than 10 s with oxygen desaturation. AHI was measured by overnight polysomnography or a portable recording device.

The secondary outcomes were mean oxygen saturation level, arousal index, sleep efficiency, total sleep time, sleep time proportion in supine position, and preference on the intervention. Mean oxygen saturation level is the average of oxygen saturation during sleep. Arousal index is the average number of arousals in an hour during sleep. Sleep efficiency is the total recorded sleep time divided by the total time in bed expressed in percentage. Total sleep time is the total number of hours in sleep measured by a machine, such as polysomnograph, within the recorded period. Sleep time proportion in supine position is the percentage of time spent in supine position during sleep divided by the total sleep time. Preference of intervention is the percentage of patients preferring the positional therapy or CPAP.

### Risk of bias and study quality

Potential sources of bias were assessed by using the Cochrane's guideline.<sup>27</sup> The risk of bias guideline basically evaluated the adequate sequence generation, subject allocation and concealment, blinding of patients and outcome assessment, outcome data completely addressed, selective outcome reporting, and other biases. The quality of each eligible trial was also assessed by the guideline of critical appraisal for randomized controlled trial.<sup>28</sup> The quality criteria were designed in a 8-point scale with reference to the questions in the guideline for study methodology, including: 1) methods of patient allocation, 2) randomization procedures with concealed allocation, 3) mechanism used to implement the random allocation sequence, such as computer-generated allocation, 4) eligibility criteria for patients and settings for data collection, 5) interventions for each group with sufficient details, 6) pre-specified primary and secondary outcome measures, 7) estimation of required sample size, and 8) methods of blinding. Some of these quality parameters were included in the risk of bias evaluation, such as the adequate sequence generation, subject allocation and concealment, and blinding methods.

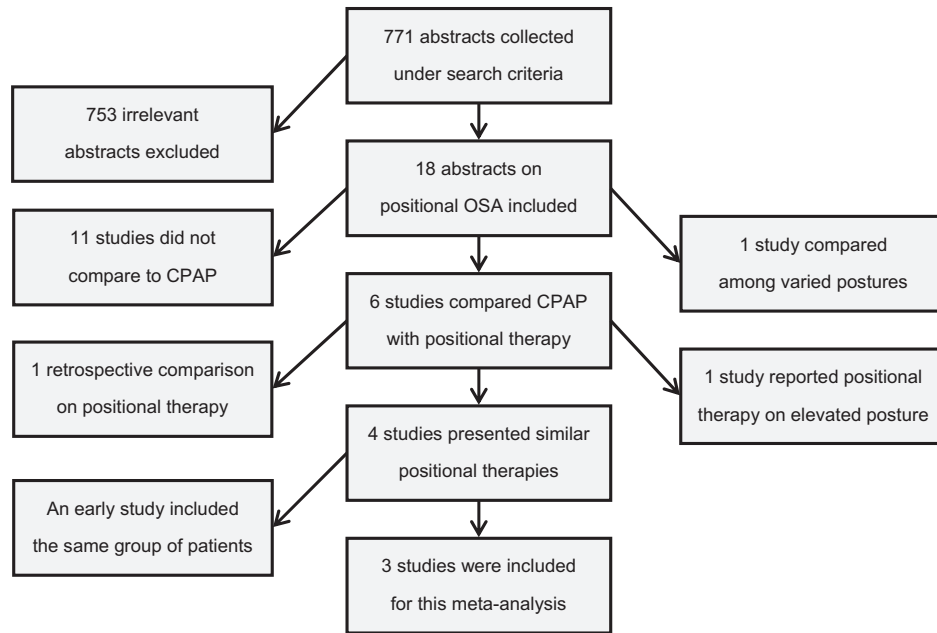
### Statistical analysis

Meta-analyses were performed with Review Manager (Copenhagen).<sup>29</sup> Relative risk (RR) and mean difference (MD) with 95% confidence interval (CI) were used to evaluate the dichotomous and continuous outcomes, respectively. Standard derivation of the mean was estimated by the 95% CI or the reported standard error. When median and range were reported as the only outcomes, sample mean and standard deviation were approximately estimated.<sup>30</sup> Statistical heterogeneity among the trials was assessed, and  $P$ -value  $<0.1$  was considered as statistically significant. Heterogeneity was assessed with  $I^2$ , which describes the percentage of total variation across studies caused by the heterogeneity rather than chance alone. High values of  $I^2$  show an increasing heterogeneity. A Mantel–Haenszel fixed-effects model was used for significant homogeneous trials; and otherwise, random-effects model was applied.<sup>31</sup> Forest plots were used to present the combined results graphically.

## Results

### Literature search

The initial search identified total 771 abstracts from published studies or conference papers (Fig. 1). All abstracts were evaluated and 18 studies were found to be relevant. Fifteen studies were excluded for the following reasons: compared different sleeping



\* OSA – obstructive sleep apnea, CPAP – continuous positive airway pressure

**Fig. 1.** Results of literature searches.

postures ( $n = 1$ ), only narrative review for positional therapy ( $n = 1$ ), retrospectively compared positional therapy with CPAP ( $n = 1$ ), reported positional therapy on a device for elevated position ( $n = 1$ ), and published the preliminary results in the same group of patients ( $n = 1$ ). The definitive analysis in this meta-analysis included three randomized crossover trials with patients from Canada, New Zealand, and United States published in 1999, 2008 and 2010, respectively (Table 1).

#### Characteristic of individual trials

Among the three randomized crossover trials, a total of 71 patients with positional OSA were randomly assigned to receive either CPAP followed by positional therapy or positional therapy followed by CPAP. The qualities of included trials were fair, as the treatment allocation cannot be blinded. Two trials were scored as 5/8,<sup>25,26</sup> and one was scored as 4/8.<sup>24</sup> The Cochrane's risk of bias was also significantly identified in the blinding of patients and outcome assessment among all of the trials. The number of patients in the individual trials ranged from 13 to 38 with a mean age of 51 y, average body mass index (BMI) 30.7 kg/m<sup>2</sup>, and the average AHI 16.6 events/h (Table 1). The duration of follow-up ranged from three nights to nine weeks. In spite of the difference in positional devices used in the studies, the same concept was used in the design to prevent sleep in supine position.

#### Outcomes

The difference in AHI between positional therapy and CPAP showed significant heterogeneity ( $P = 0.04$ ,  $I^2 = 70\%$ ), and random effects model was used. The AHI of positional therapy was significantly higher than that of CPAP (MD: 4.28, 95% CI: 0.72–7.83) (Fig. 2). In the oxygen saturation level, fixed effects model was used, as no statistical heterogeneity was observed ( $P = 0.66$ ,  $I^2 = 0\%$ ). The mean oxygen saturation level of positional therapy was significantly lower than that of CPAP (MD:  $-1.04$ , 95% CI:  $-1.63$  to  $-0.46$ ) (Fig. 3). In other secondary outcomes, significant heterogeneities were only found in the preference of intervention, and the proportion of sleep time in supine position. There were no statistically significant differences in terms of the total sleep time in minutes (MD: 9.24, 95% CI:  $-9.12$ – $27.6$ ) (Fig. 4), arousal index (MD: 0.27, 95% CI:  $-2.87$ – $3.40$ ) (Fig. 5), sleep efficiency (MD: 0.67, 95% CI:  $-3.52$ – $4.87$ ), and preference of intervention (RR: 1.00, 95% CI: 0.40–2.46). The proportion of sleep time in the supine position using positional therapy was lower than for CPAP therapy (MD:  $-41.0$ , 95% CI:  $-62.4$  to  $-19.6$ ) (Fig. 6).

#### Discussion

This meta-analysis of three randomized crossover trials compared the effectiveness of positional therapy versus CPAP

**Table 1**  
Characteristics of the included trials comparing positional therapy versus CPAP.

Study, year	Site	Study design	Sample size	Positional therapy	Age (y, mean)	BMI (kg/m <sup>2</sup> mean)	Male (%)	Overall AHI (events/h, mean)	Follow-up	Quality score (maximum, 8)
Jokic et al., <sup>24</sup> 1999	Canada	Prospective randomized crossover	13	Backpack (Soft ball, 10 × 5.5 inches)	51	30	92%	17.9	4 wk	4
Skinner et al., <sup>25</sup> 2008	New Zealand	Prospective randomized crossover	20	Thoracic anti-supine band (TASB)	55.9	30.7	NA	22.7	9 wk	5
Permut et al., <sup>26</sup> 2010	USA	Prospective randomized crossover	38	Zzoma positional sleeper (12 × 5.5 × 4 inches)	49	31	63%	13	3 nights	5

\*NA – data not available, CPAP – continuous positive airway pressure, AHI – apnea hypopnea index, BMI – body mass index.

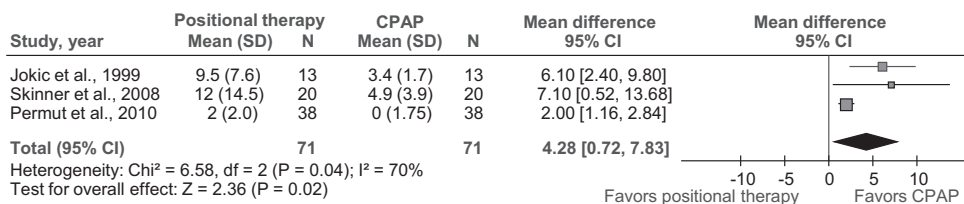
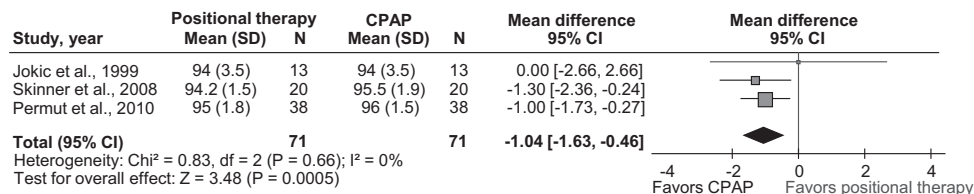


Fig. 2. Forest plot for apnea-hypopnea index (events/h).

Fig. 3. Forest plot for mean oxygen saturation level (SaO<sub>2</sub>, %).

among patients with positional OSA. CPAP is found superior to positional therapy, as it can further reduce the severity of sleep apnea in AHI and also increase oxygen saturation level. Whereas, it showed no distinct advantage over positional therapy in terms of arousal index, sleep efficiency, preference, and total sleep time but reduced the proportion of sleep time in supine position.

The American Academy of Sleep Medicine (AASM) reported that patients who have less severe OSA, less obese and younger tend to have normalized AHI in a non-supine position.<sup>32</sup> Some literature also mentioned that positional therapy is more beneficial to patients with lower BMI,<sup>9,18</sup> as there is a dynamic interaction between changes in body weight and changes in sleeping position in patients with OSA.<sup>33</sup> In this meta-analysis, the trials recruited patients with comparable age and BMI, but two of them included mild OSA patients with overall AHI of 5 events/h to 15 events/h.<sup>25,26</sup> When these two studies were kept as subgroup analysis, the difference in AHI between positional therapy and CPAP decreased from 4.28 (95% CI: 0.72–7.83) to 2.08 events/h (95% CI: 1.24–2.92). This finding implies that patients with mild positional OSA may benefit more from positional therapy than those with severe OSA. Other devices, different from positional therapy, such as a posture alarm or a

tongue retaining device have demonstrated a favorable effect in more severe OSA.<sup>12,32</sup>

However, there are several limitations in this meta-analysis. Firstly, the mean AHI and mean oxygen saturation level show statistically significant results, but the clinical implications of the differences may be insignificant. For example, the mean reduction on oxygen level from 95 to 94 was minimal among the patients on positional therapy. Secondly, although all subjects in the trials had an AHI <15 events/h, the definitions of non-supine AHI were various across the included trials. For instance, Permut et al.<sup>26</sup> defined non-supine AHI as AHI less than 5 events/h, while it was less than 10 events/h defined by Skinner et al.<sup>25</sup> In spite of the absence of a universal standard definition, patients with non-supine AHI less than 15 events/h are more likely to benefit from positional therapy. Thirdly, the devices for positional therapy and the length of the therapy were heterogeneous across the trials, and thus the clinical effectiveness of positional therapy may not be comparable. In addition, the sample size of this meta-analysis is limited by the small trials, even though they are all the available evidence-based studies published over the past decades. Some unpublished studies cannot be identified through the literature search

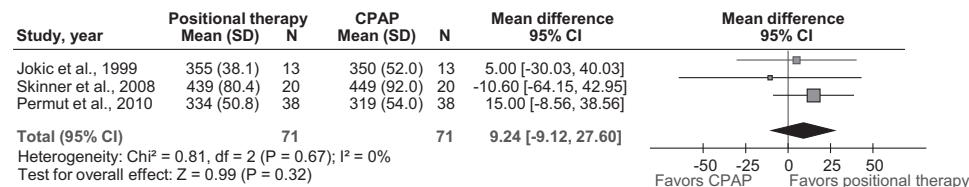


Fig. 4. Forest plot for total sleep time (min).

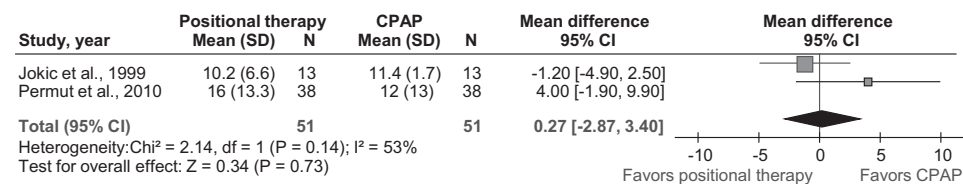


Fig. 5. Forest plot for arousal index (arousals/h).

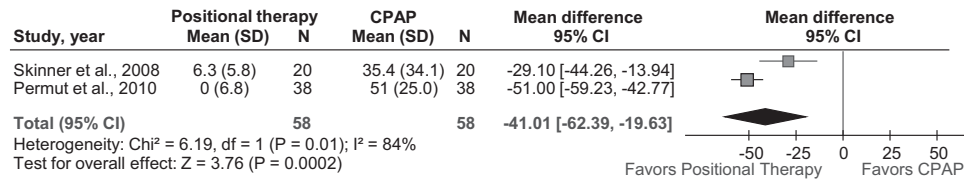


Fig. 6. Forest plot for proportion of sleep time in supine position (%).

in Ovid databases, and publication bias may exist in this meta-analysis. Finally, pathophysiological mechanisms that influence positional dependency, weight gain and alcohol consumption during the study period, and increased rapid eye movement sleep time are all reported potential barriers to the benefits of positional therapy, but these confounding factors were not reported in the trials included in our meta-analysis.

In conclusion, this meta-analysis suggests that CPAP is superior to positional therapy in reducing the severity of sleep apnea and increasing the oxygen saturation level during sleep in patients with positional OSA. As positional therapy can be simply and easily prescribed, it can be used as an alternative intervention if CPAP is either unacceptable by patients or inapplicable due to certain medical conditions. Moreover, positional therapy shows a comparable effectiveness in arousal index, sleep efficiency, and total sleep time, and therefore, a longitudinal study to evaluate the long-term efficacy of positional devices is suggested.

#### Funding source

This is a self-initiated study without any financial support.

#### Conflict of interest disclosure

There is no conflict of interest to be declared.

#### Practice points

Compared with positional therapy in patients with positional obstructive sleep apnea, continuous positive airway pressure is

- 1) superior in reducing the severity of sleep apnea and enhancing the oxygen saturation level.
- 2) comparable in terms of arousal index, sleep efficiency, preference, and total sleep time
- 3) inferior in sleep time proportion in supine position.

Positional therapy may be effective in patients with low AHI.

#### Research agenda

In the future, we need to be able to identify which patients

- 1) are potentially suitable for positional therapy, but not for continuous positive airway pressure
- 2) obtain the most significant improvement with prolonged evaluation of positional therapy

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